ZAP COMIX: 1967-1987

I did not, let me confess, buy one of those two-bit ZAPS from either Crumb or his then wife, Dana, when they were peddling them on Haight Street. I learned about ZAP from an article that appeared in the San Francisco CHRONICLE. Kind of a nerdy picture of this thin guy with glasses. Crumb. Like most people, I read "Whiteman" and most of the other early Crumb stories in the Berkeley BARB or the EAST VILLAGE OTHER. Max Scherr started the BARB in 1965 and it was his habit to clip and reprint things he found interesting, ignoring copyrights as a kind of Establishment hang-up. Means that Crumb probably didn't get paid and he didn't have a lawyer at the time so Max didn't get sued. it was hip to be anti-Establishment at the time and while some people were for real, others simply assimilated the new attitude and packaged it for re-sale. Crumb was for real. He refused the Establishment offers, gave his comix to various companies, and went the way of a hippie, though his preferred lifestyle flashed back to the 1930s. By 1975, he was wearing a sport coat, conservative hat, and playing nostalgic music with the CHEAP SUIT SERENADERS.

I didn't pay much attention to the ZAPS or the few other underground comix that were on the shelves of the Psychedelic Shop until I happened to meet Roger Brand in the lobby of Sutter Cinema one afternoon. I had gone there to talk to Arlene Elster, an old Texas friend of Janis Joplin, who was running the Sutter in partnership with Lowell Pickett. This was around 1969. A documentary, PORNOGRAPHY IN DENMARK, had played the Presidio theater, showed explicit sex, and hadn't been busted. Elster, Pickett, and others in the erotic movie business saw this event as a green light. Erotic movies would move out of the closet and become legitimate entertainment. Before long there would be features, a new industry, lots of money to be made. Roger was doing ads for Arlene, his Sutter Follies, which appeared weekly in the BARB. He was thin, long-haired, bearded, the prototype hippy, always stoned. While Arlene was hyping the upcoming Erotic Film Festival, Roger told me about the comix, the undergrounds, the new comix, the revival of EC. He talked about the comics code of 1954 and the men who were put out of work because of it. His own REAL PULP and TALES OF SEX AND DEATH were EC revivalist comix with a vengeance. I started stopping by to see Roger at his house in Point Richmond. It was there that I met Joel Beck who lived a few blocks away. Roger had a good comic art library and he had read the books. He talked about Becker and Waugh and the others who had written the early histories. He had inked for Wally Wood for awhile and he had a store house of anecdotes about the industry and the insiders. It was Roger who stimulated my interest in comics, one which had been dormant for many years. At his suggestion, I stopped by the Print Mint warehouse on Folger in Berkeley and met Bob and Peggy Rita, Don and Alice Schenkor, and too many artists to name in this limited space. Bob Rita gave me the ZAPS. I read them, and soon I was looking forward to them. ZAP was never well-organized; indeed, it's continuity was more accident than plan. Crumb did the first ones, then let Wilson, Moscoso, Shelton, and others in, and soon it was a closed scene. ZAP appeared about every two years, but Crumb was too fast for it. His comix were coming faster and faster, MOTOR CITY, BIG-ASS, HOMEGROWN, UNEEDA, DESPAIR, XYZ; his list is endless.

Crumb held nothing back. He still doesn't. He has to be the most honest of any of the underground cartoonists. Everything that has happened to him and everything he has imagined having happened to him appears somewhere in one of his comix. He anticipates his critics and interviews himself. He has opinions about everything and he never keeps them to himself. Clearly, he is a man who likes to define himself, one who never fails to attack his critics, particularly those who write for status magazines and like to intellectualize about his art. He's original, never imitative. There were no Vulture-Demonesses until they crawled out of Crumb's pen. His current biographies of obscure Blues musicians and his recent illustrated version of MOTHER HULDA in WEIRDO show him to be a careful scholar. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Crumb has never allowed himself to be sidetracked. He follows his own interests and if he makes some money along the way, fine; if he doesn't, he draws what he wants to draw anyway. Fortunately, he did not "work out" on Kurtzman's HELP! He was not destined to be the company man, forever meeting someone else's deadline. Unfortunately, very few have come along to follow Crumb's lead; the many have gone into companies to produce an explosion of mediocre second-hand super warriors; does it bother Crumb to see those who have the talent wasting it on imitations of clichés past? It bothers me.

As a comic, ZAP has survived 20 years. It is still in print, still widely read, still talked about, laughed at; for many, it is now nostalgia, something associated with a brighter period in their lives, a younger period. There are more copies of ZAP than any comic ever printed. Some years back, there was a ZAP anthology in the works at St Martin's Press in New York. The project was nearly completed when the publisher finally got around to looking at the artwork. The powers that be were horrified, probably by Joe Blow and Ruby the Dyke and the Guerrilla Women of the Third Reich, and the ZAP anthology was quietly cancelled. I'm not going to rehash all of Crumb's books here. You can look at THE CRUMB CHECKLIST for that or you can just wait for the COMPLETE CRUMB now in progress at Fantagraphics. It's enough to say that Robert Crumb has his place in history secured.

-CLAY GEERDES, June, 198?

COMIX WAVE 54. September, 1987. ©Clay Geerdes, Box 7081. Berkeley, CA 94707. All Rights Reserved. Logo: Par Holman. This issue dedicated to Robert Crumb.* New CW minis: WEIRD FETISH, FRIED BRAINS 25, and BABYFAT 59. 50¢ stamp each.* Bob Vojtko's BUG INFESTED 4 is 75¢ pp from Jim Ryan, 41 Forest Ave., Albany, N Y 12208.* SAM MOGUL PRESENTS is 50¢ stamp from Tim Chwala, 7645 Sheridan Rd, Chicago, IL 60626.* MONSTERS AND MUTANTS II is $1 pp from Jeff Gaither, 7339 St. Andrews Ch. Rd. Louisville, KY 40214.* CEREBUS 98 and PUMA BLUES 7 from A-V.* TALES OF JERRY 5 (art: Jane Taylor, dist. Last Gasp). From Renegade: KAFKA 2, SHADOWS FROM THE GRAVE, FRIENDS 1, FRENCH ICE 3.* OUT THE NEXT is $2 pp from Cat-Head, POB 954, SSF, CA 94083.* Doug Wildey's RIO album from Comico.* EL VIBORA 86, 87, 88. $7.50 each from J. M. Berengueur, See you in San Diego. Coverage and photos next issue.

CLAY GEERDES

ON REVIEWING

Reviewing. Seeing again. Looking back upon. Today reviews and Interviews tend to be events which happen. A book gets reviewed and the author gets interviewed. So and so was interviewed on Letterman the other night and he said blah blah..And it's all advertising these days, nothing more. It's all product. Surplus product at that. We have more books and movies and comic books on hand than we could possible read or watch in a couple of dozen lifetimes and most of them are copies or imitations of copies and imitations. Television makes certain that the past is always with us; this means that it is virtually impossible to create anything new. Hey, pal, a superhero is a superhero whether he's wearing tights and a cape or a ninja outfit; he's just one more escapist fantasy and his interior life is no more interesting than the swiped panels he jumps around in. He's fun, sure, but he's not worth a review or interview, not to me. I'm interested in how real people deal with real problems in the real world these days, but that's seldom seen in print or on film.

I used to review things. Movies, Books. Plays. I did it all for various reasons, freebies, money, experience (I remember being challenged by the various forms of newswriting, so I did them all at least once, think pieces, reviews, columns..), and I didn't know many of my readers and didn't really care what they thought one way or another. Most writers don't. You write for yourself, not for "them." If I met someone and I liked the person, I would give them a hand selling the book, play, movie, whatever. I didn't care , particularly when the subject was neutral for me. I learned a lot. I was just filling up space in papers and magazines. I know that. For a little while, it was fun to see my name in print all over the place, but I soon ceased to care. I even used a lot of other names just for the hell of it. Some of the papers I worked for used several names for me, because they wanted to make it look like they had a bigger staff. I didn't care. I used my own name when other professors I knew were writing under pseudonyms because they didn't want their colleagues to know they were publishing in underground newspapers. I've always been glib, your typical fast-talking gemini, but at the same time I have my standards. When I review something, I've done the research and the facts are as accurate as I can make them. Blame it on that rigid training I got from Frank Dollard in graduate school. I've had a number of beefs with various comic zine writers over the years because I've corrected their errors. In nearly every case, they attacked me personally, calling me names and defending their right to put lies in print. Well, that's their problem. They're still doing it. I don't bug them these days, because I lost interest, but it still matters. If you're going to do the review or interview, you should do your background research first.

Well, gee, how do you do that when there hasn't been anything written about your subject? Maybe you've picked the wrong subject. Comic books are still a tough field. We still have no library. Everyone who writes in the field has to have his own copies of Baugh, Becker, Reitburger, et al. We still go to public libraries and find critical pages ripped out of books re comic art, and even if someone does establish an archive in some part of the country, it will only serve those rich enough to fly there to do their research; it isn't going to help the person in Sioux Falls who decides to become a comicologist. The point is, however, if you can't do the research and can't get to where you need to get in order to do it, then you're not the person to do the writing; you have to find something else to amuse yourself with. I would like to see the comic stores become a little less greedy and commercial and more education oriented, like to see them maintain some of the useful books re comic art, perhaps in a lending library capacity, like to see them maintain xerox copies of important articles. We can't blame public libraries for not ordering the books, because many of them do, only to have them stolen right away. There probably isn't a copy of SEDUCTION OF THE INNOCENT in any library in America. How could a library keep a book in circulation when it's worth a couple of hundred on the collector's market? I would suggest keeping a xerox copy at the reference desk, but it would take a librarian serious about comic history to get into that solution.

There has to be a reason for a review, you know. And what is the reason? Is the subject worth any print? Maybe. Maybe not. In America, it's purely a matter of money. Reviews increase sales. Sometimes. Depends on who is doing the review. That writer has to have status and credibility, otherwise, who the hell cares what he says? Fact is, most people do not know the reviewers. Well, if you don't know the reviewer, what do you care about what he says? Are you going to let some stranger tell you what you should read or watch? I never read any reviews of anything, did you know that? Well, I might look at one after the fact. I saw THE UNTOUCHABLES remake (yawn!) and read some piece in a local throwaway. I read it to see what he had to say about Brian De Palma, but I make it a point not to read this type of writing. If you want to WRITE it, you don't read it, you STUDY. You want to learn to draw comics, you don't copy other people's panels, you study art and draw from life. But, I know. That's the hard way, and we have as many imitation reviewers and critics around these days as we have secondary artists.

BIG WIMP 2!
Miranda Goldfarb, Keith Leaman and Gary Cifra
GARY CIFRA
$1.00 pp. 418 Brooks Ave.
Venice, CA 90291

When I was a boy, there were no reviews that I knew about. I went in the drugstore near my house and there were comic books and detective magazines and paperbacks and I just picked out whatever struck my interest and bought it. I didn't need anyone to tell me that Carl Barks and John Stanley and Walt Kelly were the top comic writers. Their work stood out on the revolving rack. Well, there are more comic titles today, someone said. Too much. A glutted market. Someone has to sort through them all and note which are worth buying and which not. Oh, really? And who should that someone be? Don Thompson? Me? You? Thousands of books. Artists working and wanting. Talk about me and my book. Tell everyone how great I am. My superdog-bunny-mouse-ninja-elf is blah blah blah..Most people with fanzines have barely enough room to MENTION all the books let alone review or discuss them. I get pressure from readers to talk more about the artists who do the minicomics; well, I publicize their names all year long and I get around to noting what I think shows progress from time to time, and I feel most of what is done gets as much attention as it merits. I'm always pleased to see the artists get more extensive coverage in larger journals and zines. I don't have the room to do anything more than I am doing. I can give some advice to those seeking publicity and attention. First, you have to have your art together. If you're just starting out, your work is going to appear amateurish. That's what it is. It's your apprentice work. If anyone does review it, don't expect much. Don't expect fame and glory before you've done the work to deserve it. Over the years, I've seen a lot of nice artwork in the minicomix, but I've seen a lot of laziness and sloppiness, too. I think far too many people go into print before they should, but that's their choice. If art is your calling, you should be working to improve all the time and you should realize that publication of something that is inferior is going to reflect upon you now and in the future. I know so many artists who hate it when their early stuff is given to them to autograph at a convention. Being in print feels good, but what if it makes you look bad?

Before anyone can REview something, there has to have been something there to view in the first place.

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